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Multi-Agency Service Teams A New Approach in Maine To Deliver Technical Assistance to Rural Manufacturers

In 1994, the State of Maine began an experiment to improve the coordination of technical assistance to wood products manufacturers. State and Federal agencies worked with colleges, private consultants, and nonprofit organizations to target assistance to the particular needs of the wood products industry. Results were generally positive but also showed the need to carefully match assistance with the requirements of the individual firm and to improve teamwork among service providers. Preparation and coordination emerged as key factors in determining the success of delivering services.

Providing technical assistance to small- to medium-sized rural manufacturers is a serious challenge. On the one hand, each manufacturer has a unique set of technical concerns plus a full range of business needs, such as financing, marketing, personnel management, and inventory control. Rural manufacturers are also often relatively small businesses, relying on the daily involvement of their owners. These businesses are often located in areas remote not only from markets but also from service providers. Many owners and/or managers of small- to medium-sized rural manufacturing firms are so caught up in day-to-day production challenges that they have little time to investigate the sources of assistance that may be

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available to them, and even less time to arrange and coordinate delivery of various types of assistance.

Technical assistance services available to manufacturers are often only available offsite. The owner or manager must travel to receive training or advice that may or may not prove applicable to their business. This is costly to the business in time and money. Under these circumstances, many businesses that need assistance receive none at all. Furthermore, technical assistance providers tend to specialize in business planning assistance, marketing, or production-related concerns. For example, the Maine Small Business Development Center helps businesses develop business plans, but its employees have had only limited exposure to the wood products industry. They are not in a position to assist wood products businesses in identifying and assessing new markets, for instance. Industrial Extension (from the Department of Industrial Cooperation) provides consulting in machining and plant layout but not in business practices or marketing. The Workforce Development Center

can assist businesses in meeting labor training needs, but has no experience in business development per se or in how to improve manufacturing efficiency and safety. Organizations offering technical assistance rarely take a holistic approach to client needs, nor are they often aware of services available to clients that fall outside their own particular areas of expertise, resulting in fragmented service delivery.

Recent reductions in funding for many Federal and State programs, and the new emphasis in government on reducing duplication of services and stretching existing programs as far as possible, may prompt innovative rural developers to investigate interagency cooperation, outreach to companies, and “teaming” as an approach to service delivery. This happened in Maine when the Maine State Planning Office and the Maine Rural Development Council decided to try a new approach to assisting secondary wood products manufacturers in rural Maine. In the wood products industry, primary manufacturers are sawmills and veneer mills. Secondary wood manufacturers turn kiln-dried boards and/or logs into products like furniture and furniture components, wood novelties, shelving, cabinetry, molding, log home kits, fence posts, and pallets. Experiments in coordinating government and private services to industries in Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Ohio have paralleled Maine’s effort.



Molding and other products made by R.L. White & Son, Mount Desert Island, Maine, courtesy of the Maine Wood Products Association.

MAST Pilot Project: Providing Assistance to Secondary Wood Processing Firms

The wood products industry is one of the most important manufacturing industries in Maine. In 1997, according to the Maine Department of Labor, 839 forest products firms (601 primary and 238 secondary) employed 10,921 people with a payroll of \$251 million. This represented 14 percent of total industrial employment in Maine. The 1996 Maine Gross State Product from lumber and wood products was \$710 million. The industry has hundreds of firms manufacturing thousands of different products. However, the industry’s potential is greater than its performance, particularly when it comes to adding value to Maine’s forest resources.

Recognizing this, the Maine State Planning Office and the Maine Rural Development Center convened a meeting of service providers in 1992 to discuss “value-adding” as a strategy for economic development. In 1993, a meeting was held with State agencies to discuss the development of interagency marketing strategies. Out of these meetings, a Working Group on Value-Added was formed and began to focus on the small- and medium-sized wood products firms as a target group. Members of the working group realized that the failure to adopt new technology is a critical barrier to increasing the value-added positions of Maine’s resource-based industries.

In 1994, a member of the working group suggested an approach to service delivery that would be based on cooperation among agencies, programs, and service providers and would be directed at wood products manufacturers. By 1994, the Multi-Agency Service Team (MAST) Steering Committee had been formed around a shared sense that Maine’s existing service delivery system for technical assistance to wood products firms was not meeting its potential. Service providers to the industry were identified and offered the opportunity to work together, and Maine Forest Products Marketing shared a survey of the technical assistance needs of secondary wood products firms.

The MAST pilot project began in October 1994 with the first steering committee meeting, and continued until June 1995. The steering committee (see “MAST Steering Committee”) worked with two coordinators—one from the Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments and the other from Maine Forest Products Marketing—who identified and recruited service providers (see “MAST Service Providers”) and coordinated service delivery to firms. The steering committee invited each of Maine’s five Resource Conservation and Development Districts (RC&D’s) to participate in the pilot by assisting in the identification of one target firm in their region. Four of the RC&D’s chose to participate. The four firms selected by the RC&D’s for the MAST pilot were a fine furniture maker; a job shop (which

custom-manufactures items for other businesses one batch at a time); a manufacturer of cedar log homes, fencing, and novelties; and a maker of fine drumsticks and novelties.

The first firm to participate in MAST—the producer of log homes, fencing, and novelties—provides a good example of how MAST worked. The St. John Aroostook RC&D Forestry Committee visited five firms in their region and chose this one because they felt its needs were most amenable to a MAST approach. The owner agreed to participate. The coordinator from Maine Forest Products Marketing took responsibility for the service delivery to this firm. The coordinator used the firm's response to the Maine Forest Products Marketing needs assessment to identify a group of service providers. The group included people from Industrial Extension, the Heart of Maine RC&D, Cooperative Extension, and Seven Islands, a private forest management company. The group of service providers visited the firm twice, once with the coordina-



Drumsticks are among the high-quality wood products manufactured in Maine: Vic Firth Manufacturing Company, Newport, Maine, courtesy of the Maine Wood Products Association.

tor and once without. During the first visit, the owner reiterated the firm's needs, which included assistance in marketing log homes and new products, sawmill efficiency and safety, and business and office management.

During the course of the two visits, two service providers from Industrial Extension and Cooperative Extension (Forestry Specialist - Wood Technology) toured the manufacturing facility with the owner and addressed several safety issues such as where saw guards should be placed and how to design more effective guards. They also made suggestions for personnel safety. By working together, providers were able to address 80 percent of the safety issues that had been identified by the Maine Labor and Safety Board.

During a tour of the novelties production facility, the Industrial Extension provider was able to identify a problem related to adhesives that was unknown to the owner. The provider researched alternative adhesives and presented a set of very specific and highly useful written recommendations. Service providers also suggested that the owner use his sawmill waste to manufacture wood pellets. From that discussion, the owner installed a drying room for wood waste to allow it to be bagged and sold dry, thus transforming a waste product into a resource. The coordinator also signed the owner up for a regional trade show.

Not all the MAST efforts in this case were successful. As part of one visit, two different service providers met with the owner to discuss his business and office management practices. Although they agreed to return for a second visit, the second visit never materialized. The service providers recall making several suggestions regarding delegation of tasks by the owner, yet several months later the owner was unable to recall any specific recommendations that they had made. Nor did these providers offer written followup. Coordination between the two sets of service providers was lacking.

MAST Experience Provides Important Lessons About Service Delivery

One litmus test for the relative success of a project designed to improve service delivery is whether or not the firms receiving services believed they benefited. In three out of four cases, firms reported concrete improvements, including locating and hiring a subsidized employee to get a computerized inventory system up and running, putting humidifiers in the wood shop, discovering more effective adhesives, adding newly designed guards for saws that led to fewer accidents, and making a strong start on a strategic marketing plan including new accounts with new clients. Despite these tangible successes, all four firms reported areas of dissatisfaction and unmet needs. The owner of the one firm that did not report improvements

felt that the assistance offered, which was mainly in production, did not address his own priorities in the area of marketing. MAST firms were uniformly aware that they needed help. They were not aware of the range of services available to them prior to their involvement with MAST. Outreach to firms not only solved some specific problems but put firms in touch with resources they can use on an as-needed basis in the future.

The MAST experience produced six important lessons in engaging firms and service providers in effective service delivery.

Train service providers in how to listen and respond to owners. In talking with owner/managers and service providers, it became clear that the perceptions of owners and service providers do not always agree. When service providers pursue their own visions at the expense of addressing the firm's priorities, owners become frustrated. Although service providers may perceive real needs that owners do not perceive, owners are far more likely to be receptive to new information once their perceived needs are addressed. Service providers who fail to address the perceived needs of owners in favor of their own observations of need tend to blame the firm for failure to implement their suggestions. Just as owners need assistance in learning how best to work with service providers, service providers would benefit from training in how to work productively with firms.

Prepare firms for providers' visits. The needs of the firms who participated in MAST were identified through a combination of survey responses and discussions with coordinators. The more thorough the assessment of the firm prior to field visits by service providers, the clearer the priorities are and the greater the potential for providing recommendations that fit the overall context of the firm's financial and operational potential. A thorough assessment would include instructions to the owner about how to get the most out of the MAST experience. Three out of four firms who participated in the pilot felt they could have used help in preparing for providers' visits and identifying questions to ask. Owner/managers would have benefited from assistance in framing the problems they were facing and the questions they wanted answered and in preparing the background information service providers need to make informed recommendations. In the absence of this type of preparation, some recommendations will be unfeasible for the firm.

Match service providers' expertise to firm needs. The services being delivered should be carefully matched to the needs of the firm, and should be provided by those who are truly competent and qualified to address those needs. Different levels of expertise are appropriate to different firms. The same service provider will not necessarily

MAST Steering Committee

Co-chairs

Maine Rural Development Council
Maine State Planning Office

University

University of Maine at Orono

Private Sector

Moosehead Manufacturing

Public Sector

Maine Forest Service
USDA Forest Service
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
Workforce Development Center
Maine Department of Economic and Community Development

Nonprofit

Coastal Enterprises, Inc.
Market Development Center
Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments
Maine Forest Products Marketing
Heart of Maine Resource Conservation and Development District
St. John-Aroostook Resource Conservation and Development District

ily be able to meet the needs of every firm. To effectively match service providers to firms, coordinators should understand, at a minimum, the priorities of the owner(s) and the investment capacity of the firm.

Focus on one problem at a time. It is difficult for owners to focus on more than one aspect of their operation at a time. Rather than bringing all service providers to the firm at one time, it may make more sense to address issues sequentially, beginning with the problem that is foremost in the owner's mind.

Follow through and request feedback from firms. Firms expect and deserve follow-through from service providers and coordinators. Coordinators should be prepared to intervene in instances where providers are ineffectual by recommending an alternative provider. Service providers would benefit from feedback from coordinators regarding the effectiveness of their interventions.

Train service providers in how to work as a team. The MAST pilot project was based on the notion of a team approach to service delivery, yet very little attention was paid to the process of teaming. Coordinators assumed that service providers would know how to work as a team. In reality, only one provider had previous experience in working as part of a team of professionals from different agencies; several others had experience with

MAST Service Providers

Community Colleges and Universities

Husson College
Thomas College
Department of Industrial Cooperation, University of Maine,
Orono

Private Sector

Northern White Cedar, Inc.
Seven Islands
Bob Dionne, Private Consultant

Public Sector

Maine Small Business Development Center
Workforce Development Center
Maine Department of Economic and Community Development
Cooperative Extension

Nonprofit

Maine Forest Products Marketing
Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments
Coastal Enterprises, Inc.

informal or in-house teams, but none had received any training in teaming. MAST failed to provide such training, nor did it clearly spell out its expectations with regard to teamwork. As a result, for the most part, MAST service providers operated independently and made their recommendations to the firms in isolation from the other providers. The benefits of a team approach can only be fully realized if attention and resources are devoted to the process of teamwork itself.

Learning at the Top

The benefits of MAST accrued to participants in the Steering Committee as well as to firms. MAST provided a testing ground for agency assumptions about how best to meet industry needs. Some assumptions were confirmed; others were not.

A highly diverse industry can best be served in a regional context. The diversity in the secondary wood products industry makes it extremely challenging to service. Resources need to be identified and activated on a regional basis. Structures need to be created for firms to learn from one another.

Expertise is relatively scarce. There are a limited number of service providers in Maine who have the real expertise to assist small- to medium-sized firms in solving their technical and marketing problems. Creative solutions must be found to leverage this expertise effectively. The flow of information could be improved through access to electronic networking by regional coordinators and service providers. Coordinators need to take on a larger role in the front end of the process by conducting more thor-

The Goals of MAST

To demonstrate how service providers (Federal, State, nonprofit, and private sectors) can work together to more effectively meet the business and technical needs of secondary wood products firms in Maine

To develop effective coordination and collaborative relationships in a team approach on a pilot basis in five regions of the State

To document and evaluate the demonstration project in terms of both process and outcome so that lessons learned can be applied to similar efforts

To build a stronger network of service providers

To create a delivery system organized and responsive to the needs of the forest products industry

ough needs assessments and giving providers more detailed information up front.

Commitment of midlevel professionals is more important than formal agreements between agencies. The success of MAST depends on the commitment and agility of the midlevel people, the coordinators, and the providers themselves. Formal commitments by the agencies themselves are not necessary, as long as agency staff have enough flexibility to participate effectively.

Different agencies have different incentive structures. Representatives from each agency benefit from understanding the incentives (and constraints) their colleagues face. To the extent that these can be stated and understood up front, communication and interaction between agencies may be improved. One agency with marketing expertise actually dropped out of MAST due to its incentive structure that requires short-term results.

Changing the Way Agencies Do Businesses

Several of the public and nonprofit agencies that cooperated to create and implement MAST have actually changed the way they do business as a result of the experience. The Maine Small Business Development Center used MAST as an opportunity to train most of its counselors statewide in the basics of the wood products industry. Maine's Workforce Development Center has continued to work with the Maine Wood Products Association (an outgrowth of Maine Forest Products Marketing). Husson Community College has expanded its services to wood products firms on the basis of its positive experience using MAST as a training ground for students. Through MAST, the Northern Maine Development Commission is forging new relationships with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Maine Department of Labor. The staff of the Resource Conservation and Development Districts and the Androscoggin Valley Council of

Governments have also gained a greater knowledge of the wood products sector as a result of MAST.

However, none of the benefits of MAST would have been realized without the commitment of a few daring individuals who were willing to cooperate and share resources with other agencies and groups despite, in some cases, a lack of strong institutional support. In the instances where institutional support was weak or lacking at high levels, it is unlikely that MAST will result in significant changes in organizational culture or that the lessons of MAST will be widely shared within the organization.

Maine Forest Products Marketing has been dissolved after 3 years of raising awareness of industry needs. In its place are the Maine Wood Products Association, a trade association, and the Maine Manufacturing Extension Center, a Federal-State-private sector partnership to extend technical services to the manufacturing sector. The Maine Manufacturing Extension Center will use field agents in much the same way that MAST used coordinators. The lessons learned through MAST are already being applied by the Maine Manufacturing Extension Center, which is engaged in ongoing outreach to the wood products sector.

For Further Reading . . .

Carol Conway, "A 'Learning Network' in Southwestern Pennsylvania," Corporation for Enterprise Development, 1995.

June Holley, "A New Approach to Training and Job Creation," Appalachian Center for Economic Networks, 1993.

Yellow Wood Associates, Inc., "Evaluation of the Multi-Agency Service Team Approach to the Delivery of Business and Technical Assistance in Support of the Maine Secondary Wood Products Industry," 1996.